

# Texas Guardsmen used in clandestine scouting - Two missions with Border Patrol aimed at drug smugglers

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Armed teams of Texas National Guard paratroopers and elite U.S. Border Patrol agents have cooperated in two clandestine reconnaissance operations aimed at drug smugglers on the Texas-Mexico border.

The patrols, similar to those conducted to obtain intelligence on enemy forces in combat, were carried out last fall and spring in Big Bend National Park.

U.S. Border Patrol officials say the scouting missions were successful and will be carried out in the future, but declined to say when.

The clandestine missions are the only ones of their kind in the United States, according to Border Patrol officials, and are part of a pilot project to prove the feasibility of such operations.

Until recently, ranking officers of the Texas Army National Guard headquarters at Camp Mabry in Austin denied the existence of Operation Unity even as the patrols were being planned.

Texas Army Guard spokesman Lt. Col. Ed Komandosky still refuses to divulge information on the scouting missions, instead referring all questions to the offices of Operation Alliance.

Operation Alliance, a federal program based in El Paso and directed by Jim Bowen of the Border Patrol, coordinates anti-drug operations among different law enforcement agencies. Bowen also oversees Operation Unity.

In April, U.S. Sen. Phil Gramm revealed that the Texas National Guard would in the future patrol the Texas-Mexico border. However, two scouting operations had already been conducted by the time Gramm made his announcement.

Also at the time, congressional sources said National Guardsmen would paint themselves to ``look like a cactus bush" to elude detection by drug smugglers.

On the contrary, information acquired by the Houston Chronicle indicates that the operations thus far conducted were complex, carefully planned and physically grueling for those on patrol.

Rather than dressing as cacti, the patrol members wear tropical combat clothing similar to that worn by U.S. forces during the Vietnam War, said Tom Wacker, associate chief of Border Patrol operations in Marfa. The first two operations have been staged from that far West Texas town.

Confidential sources indicate that a former member of Delta Force, the highly elite U.S. military anti-terrorist unit, provided some training to Guardsmen on how to enter the area disguised as hikers or tourists.

Once near where the patrolling began, they infiltrated into the backcountry and somehow were equipped with weapons and communication equipment.

Helicopters were not used to ``insert" the patrol teams into the wilderness since the aircraft could be seen and heard for miles, said Bowen.

He would not divulge how radios, equipment and weapons are then transferred to them. Asked if resupply of the patrol teams was by parachute from high-flying aircraft, he would only say the actual method was ``more sophisticated than that."

In the fall, when the first patrol was conducted, the team lived in the rugged terrain of the Big Bend area for seven days. During the second operation, the team traveled through the wilderness for 15 days looking for suspicious activity along the Rio Grande.

Though Border Patrol officials decline to discuss many details concerning the reconnaissance patrols, the teams probably consist of eight men.

The tactics used by such patrols in combat mean they travel at night and set up in concealed observation locations during the day.

“Their job is to remain undetected and to avoid contact with anyone,” said Bowen.

“Their purpose is to gather intelligence or confirm intelligence on drug smuggling that we have already received and radio (that) information back to local law enforcement officials.”

Blending Guard paratroopers with Border Patrol agents has been a good combination because each group possesses different skills, Bowen said.

“The Guardsmen have good radio communication skills and the Border Patrol agents are good trackers and know the country. We're going to continue to train and share these skills with each other.”

Use of National Guard troops to perform police functions is opposed by Michael Ratner, an attorney with the Center for Constitutional Rights in New York.

“Using the National Guard in this way is a bad precedent,” said Ratner. “There should be a bright and clear line between civilian law enforcement officials and this type of thing makes that line less clear.”

The citizens of Latin American countries have seen their freedoms eroded or completely stamped out by their own military forces, which enforce the law in a brutal fashion or depose governments that displease them, said Ratner.

Ratner also said military forces are trained to use a maximum amount of firepower for the destruction of an enemy and that civil policemen in America are trained to use the minimum amount of force while recognizing individual rights.

“I know National Guardsmen and they're all really a good group of guys, but they are not doing what they are trained to do,” he said.

The Guardsmen carry M-16 assault rifles while the Border Patrol Agents are armed with M-16 rifles as well as sidearms.

Bowen says the weapons are issued only for the purpose of self-defense. The

ammunition issued to each patrol team member is counted round by round upon their return. He said no shots have been fired by team members and there have been no injuries among those on patrol.

According to sources that asked to remain anonymous, the Guardsmen are hand-picked from Company G, an Airborne-Ranger unit of the 143rd Infantry Regiment, which is based near downtown Houston at 3816 Caroline.

The unit's actual wartime mission is to infiltrate enemy territory and gather intelligence for the U.S. Army's III Corps armored command based at Fort Hood near Killeen - a mission not unlike the clandestine border patrols carried out so far.

Even the Border Patrol agents used in the operation are themselves carefully selected from Border Patrol Tactical Units or ``BorTach" teams. These teams were organized four years ago to track drug smugglers in the frequently severe terrain of the southwestern United States, said El Paso Border Patrol supervisor Bob Goldman.

Though the patrols have only been conducted in the Big Bend area, future operations will probably be carried out along other portions of the Texas-Mexico border, said Bowen.

Patrols conducted by the teams have been successful, said William Bonnette, deputy assistant commissioner for the Border Patrol in Washington.

However, Border Patrol officials refuse to discuss specific actions by the patrol teams that would illustrate this claim.

``We can't say too much about what we have done or how we do it because it would only help the bad guys," said Wacker.

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**Houston Chronicle**

**Date:** JUNE 11, 1989

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